

Our Witness in a Time of Pandemic
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In his *Second Letter to the Church in Corinth*, St. Paul wrote about living in faith and engaging the ministry of reconciliation. Then, at chapter six, verses eleven to thirteen, he inserts a comment which seems personal at first glance:

We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also (2 Corinthians 6:11-13).

It is easy to read this as a request by St. Paul for the Corinthians to take the same emotional stance towards him that he has towards them. This is in part true. It is also true that an open heart is necessary to the life of faith and the ministry of reconciliation. Our hearts are supposed to be open to God and other human beings. Making space in our hearts for the other (God, people) enables us to participate in the work of bringing people and God together (reconciliation).

The openness of our hearts is spiritually crucial. Given this, the language of infection and prevention is a bit of a challenge for us. People are talking about avoiding, closing, and social distancing. These are not our standard behaviors. It is difficult for us, to choose one example, not to greet each other with a hand shake or hug as we exchange the peace. We are great at greeting each other, the stranger, and those in need. Our hearts are open and they should remain so.

One of the great spiritual challenges is maintaining an open heart at a level which is more broad than the personal. How do we maintain an open heart towards something as extensive and widespread as public health? At the more personal level, my open-heartedness is facilitated and reinforced by my feelings. I may feel warm towards the other, or I may have compassion towards the other. I may love that other person. The feeling helps me be open-hearted. For many, public health is a little too abstract for my feelings. I may appreciate good public health, but can I love it?

This is where our commitments help us. I don't depend on loving public health to be open hearted. Rather, our commitment to Christ, and our love of Christ, motivates us to be open hearted. We want to love the world just as does Christ. Our commitment is to play our part in his most gracious work on behalf of everyone. We forego public worship in this time of pandemic because it is good for public health. Avoiding gatherings helps to limit infection. It helps address hospital overcrowding. We make a sacrifice for the good of everyone in order to do a little bit of Christ-like love. This is our witness to Christ; being open hearted to everyone even, and especially, when it's a sacrifice.